



## **A Case Study in the Cultivation of “Practical Wisdom”: The Methodology of the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi**

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

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## A Case Study in the Cultivation of “Practical Wisdom”:

### The Methodology of the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi

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“How can we create the ideal character?” “How can we cultivate practical wisdom?” These questions have contemporary significance; they are universal tasks extending beyond the localities where we live today. They have also been ongoing tasks throughout the history of humankind. In this presentation, I wish to investigate the methodology of learning devised by Zhu Xi, a neo-Confucian thinker, as a typical example of the methods of cultivating “practical wisdom” in the history of East Asian thought. My aim then, is to offer perspectives and materials to deepen our thinking about the nurturing of human morality as a contemporary and universal problem shared by the whole of humankind.

#### 1. Introduction: point of contact with “practical wisdom” or “phronesis”

##### 1.1 The sage as the embodiment of moral perfection

In the history of East Asian thought, especially that of China, we often encounter the term “sage,” meaning a person with an ideal character or one who has reached the highest stage of moral development. The term originally described the ancient ideal of a figure who created civilizations or institutions. But, in the course of time, its meaning has changed. Neo-Confucians, advocates of the innovation movement within the traditions of Confucianism who began to appear in the 10th century A.D, conceptualized a sage as a person of ideal character or the embodiment of moral perfection, and under the slogan “anyone can be a sage,” proposed a method of learning or educational methodology that could lead a person to achieve an ideal character.

Neo-Confucians paid attention to the image of a sage described in the *Doctrine of the Mean* :

"Some are born with the knowledge [of these virtues]. Some learn it through study. Some learn it through hard work. But when the knowledge is acquired, it comes to the same thing. Some practice the virtues naturally and easily. Some practice them for advantage. Some practice them with effort and difficulty. But

when the achievement is made, it comes to the same thing."<sup>1</sup>

These words indicate three ranks of knowledge and practice. The lowest rank is “learn it through hard work”, and “practice virtues with effort and difficulty” (because they still haven’t understood why these practices are good or true). The middle rank is “learn it through study” (which means conscious engagement), and practice virtues for advantage (because they have already understood why they are good, but they need to practice them consciously and intentionally). The highest rank of knowledge and practice is “born with the knowledge” (this metaphoric explanation means the ability to recognize and judge the object of the knowledge simultaneously), and “practice virtues naturally and easily” (which means unconscious, unintentional practice). The difference between sage and man is depicted as follows:

“Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man. He who is sincere is one who hits upon what is right without effort and apprehends without thinking. He is naturally and easily in harmony with the Way. Such a man is a sage. He who tries to be sincere is one who chooses the good and holds fast to it.”<sup>2</sup>

A sage is conceptualized as someone with an ideal character, equipped with the ability to judge and behave appropriately, and is able to cope flexibly with changing circumstances. For Neo-Confucian thinkers, developing an ideal character meant to obtain the “practical wisdom” that enables one to judge and conduct oneself in an appropriate manner in all circumstances.

It was Zhu Xi, a leading neo-Confucian scholar, who explored and theorized the method of cultivating practical wisdom. In the course of so doing, he proposed the thesis that the constant effort of coping with every aspect of the current situation one faces and deals with, is eventually converted into the “practical wisdom” that enables one to deal immediately with any situation one may encounter. Here we find some important ways of thinking about the relationship between wisdom and practice. First, Zhu Xi argues that wisdom and practice are inseparable, and that true wisdom is in fact the practical wisdom that

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<sup>1</sup> *The Doctrine of the Mean*, ch.20. translated by WING-TSIT CHAN, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 1963, p.105.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

operates when perception, judgement, and behavior are closely linked. Second, he thinks that practical wisdom lies in understanding and imitating, and especially in habituating oneself to the speech and behavior of the sages handed down from ancient times. Third, practical wisdom is thought to be the final mental stage and therefore cannot be verbalized. Finally, he asserts that the ultimate goal of “practical wisdom” can be approached only through the accumulation of constant, intellectual exploration in the present.

In this presentation I will focus on the four points mentioned above, and present materials that allow us to examine and explore the methods of achieving the “ideal character,” and of cultivating “practical wisdom.”

## 1.2 About Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi, 1130-1200)

Zhu Xi was a Neo-Confucian master of the Southern Song (1126–1271). He passed the Imperial Examination at the age of 19, but his philosophical views were too radical for the rulers to accept and he declined official positions. In 1196, his teachings were prohibited, and someone even demanded his execution. Through that period, he devoted most of his time to scholarship and education. He emphasized the *Four Books*: the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects of Confucius*, and the *Mencius* as the core curriculum for education. His life’s work was to write extensive commentaries for the *Four Books*. They later became accepted as the new standard commentaries after his death, and served as the basis of civil service examinations up until 1905. He had great influence not only on Chinese life and thought, but also on those of Korea and Japan. His oral teachings are preserved in the *Classified Dialogues of Master Zhu* (Zhuzi yulei, YL), which are quoted in this presentation.

## 2. Knowledge is inseparable from practice (True knowledge, “*zhen-zhi*”)

Neo-Confucian thinkers including Zhu Xi recognize that knowledge is inseparable from practice. As Zhu Xi says “The efforts of both knowledge and action must be exerted to the utmost. As one knows more clearly, he acts more earnestly, and as he acts more earnestly, he knows more clearly.”<sup>3</sup> Knowledge and practice are expected to influence each other and to grow side by side. Although his view has a tendency to intellectualism which includes practice in knowledge, such as saying; “If one already knows it, one can act it naturally

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.609.

without any effort,”<sup>4</sup> the basic concept of all Neo-Confucian thinkers is that knowledge is inseparable from practice. This means that any knowledge is equal to practical knowledge. Therefore, the object of knowledge (what to know) itself is also considered according to this basic concept. Zhu Xi says, “the most urgent and the closest thing” to know is “self-mind”, the next to know is “action of mouth, nose, ear, eye, and limb,” which “self-body possesses”. The next to know is “the constant bonds between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friend and friend,” with which self-body relates.” In this way, the object of knowledge is widespread to others, and all things. (“As in the extremely large, - the operation of heaven and earth,- changes of history cannot be excluded. As in the extremely small, - a tiny dust particle or moment - they cannot be excluded.”)<sup>5</sup> These explanations indicate that the objects of knowledge are arranged by the urgency or importance for oneself. In other words, they are distributed by the practical meaning of the knowledge.

From this point of view, Neo-Confucian thinkers advocated the phrase “true knowledge.”

I [Master Cheng Yi] once saw a farmer who had been wounded by a tiger. When someone said that a tiger was hurting people, everyone was startled. But in his facial expression the farmer reacted differently from the rest. Even a young boy knows that tigers can hurt people, but his is not true knowledge. It is true knowledge only if it is like the farmer's. Therefore, when men know evil and still do it, this also is not true knowledge. If it were, they would surely not do it.<sup>6</sup>

When you drink alcohol, you get intoxicated. When you eat food, you get full. When you ingest poison, you die. You can know intoxication when you actually get drunk, you can know fullness when you actually eat food. Those who have no experience of drinking alcohol or eating food just listen to what other people say so, their understanding is uncertain. If understanding becomes certain, it is surely the same as "a person hurt by a tiger" - mentioned by Master Cheng Yi.<sup>7</sup>

While one knows that he should not do wrong, he will do it, because his

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<sup>4</sup> YL vol.18, p. 391.

<sup>5</sup> *Questions and Answers on the Great Learning* (da-xue huo-wen),

<sup>6</sup> *Surviving works of Master Chengs of Henan*, vol.18, p.188; CHAN (1963), p.551.

<sup>7</sup> YL vol.18, p.391.

knowledge about it is not wide enough. When you know you cannot eat Wu-hui (deadly poison), you never eat it. This is true knowledge. While one knows that he should not do wrong, he will do it, because he hasn't yet known it truly. The reason why he hasn't yet known it truly is because he has just understood the surface of the principle, and has been unable to understand fully from the inside, and his knowledge remains unclear. ... Therefore, The Great Learning suggests to us that one must understand everything one comes into contact with from the outside, and then, get deeper understanding through the way of inner empirical understanding.<sup>8</sup>

All of this tells us that empirical knowledge is the knowledge that affects practice, and deeper (higher) knowledge does not affect practice. In addition, the aimed at knowledge is assumed to have the solidity of the connection between knowledge and practice. As if the knowledge (of dying from eating deadly poison) and practice (don't eat) are directly connected with the fear of one's life being threatened.

When Zhu Xi talked about investigating what one should do, he often used the expression "non-stoppable." For example, "Things in society, which humans have developed can be stopped by humans. What we cannot stop is truly natural." In other words, he seeks a phase of recognition that generates automatic and natural reactions (judgment) that do not contain any intention and therefore cannot be stopped even if one is consciously ordered to stop them. "True knowledge" as Zhu Xi stated, entails such feelings as non-stoppable certainty. "Inner understanding" above, is also supposed to lead to a way of knowing accompanied by "non-stoppable" nature leading to thorough knowledge and verification by experience. Zhu Xi's idea of "If one has already known it, one can act it naturally without any effort," as its premise, is the property of knowledge without any distance between knowing (recognition and judgement) and acting (judgement and practice).

### 3. How to cultivate practical wisdom

#### 3.1 "The investigation of things and the extension of knowledge"

Based on the above, I would like to introduce the methodology of Zhu Xi's approach for acquiring practical knowledge. In his most important classic in which that methodology was mentioned, Zhu Xi highly evaluated the *Great*

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<sup>8</sup> YL vol.46, p.1173.

*Learning* and treated it in the first book so that learners could understand the whole academic structure. More importantly, he remarks that the fifth chapter of commentary in the *Great Learning* explains the meaning of the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge, which is now lost. Also that he has ventured to take the view of Master Cheng Yi and supplement it as follows:

The meaning of the expression "The perfection of knowledge depends on the investigation of things (*ge-wu*)" is this: If we wish to extend our knowledge to the utmost, we must investigate the principles (*li*) of all things we come into contact with, for the intelligent mind of man is certainly formed to know, and there is not a single thing in which its principles do not inhere. It is only because all principles are not investigated that man's knowledge is incomplete. For this reason, the first step in the education of the adult is to instruct the learner in regard to all things in the world, to proceed from what knowledge he has of their principles, and investigate further until he reaches the limit. After exerting himself in this way for a long time, he will one day achieve a wide and far-reaching penetration. Then the qualities of all things, whether internal or external, the refined or the coarse, will be apprehended, and the mind, in its total substance and great functioning, will be perfectly intelligent. This is called the investigation of things. This is called the perfection of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 "Principle (*li*)"

The concept of "principle (*li*)" that appears above is the most important element in Zhu Xi's ideological system, so his school is called "the learning of principle (*li-xue*)". However, he did not provide any explicit definition of it. He came closest to defining it when he said:

When it comes to all things under heaven, for each [of the things] there must be a "reason (*gu*) by which [a thing is] as it is" and "a rule (*ze*) according to which [a thing is] as it ought to be". [These are] what are called "*li*."<sup>10</sup>

In brief, principle (*li*) mentioned here is the basis (reason) for setting a thing as it is (why do) and the law (rule), what it should be (what to do). Everything (including the phenomena here) has its own principles, and the content of

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<sup>9</sup> CHAN (1963), p.89.

<sup>10</sup> Questions and Answers on the *Great Learning* (da-xue huo-wen); Kim 2000, p.19.

knowing is stated as knowing the principle to the extent possible, which means exploring "what to do" for everything.

With regard to the two aspects of "why do" and "what to do", Zhu Xi states that "what" should come first and "why" later. This procedure is the same as his notion of the relationship between elementary learning (for learners under 15 years old) and the great learning (for learners over 15 years old). He says that learners in elementary learning learn and understand matter, those in great learning learn the reasons and the basis for that matter<sup>11</sup>. The matter is for example, "how to sprinkle and sweep the ground, how to answer and reply to each person, how to advance and recede in each situation."<sup>12</sup> In short, it means to teach habitual basic norms and behavior. When one is over 15 years old, based on this elementary learning, one seeks reasons and the basis of the norm by the great learning. Therefore Zhu Xi sometimes classifies things using the principle of "what to do", and classifies reasons and bases using the principle of "why do."

### 3.3 The final stage of knowledge as the one universal principle

As Kim (2000) explained, Zhu Xi's theory of "*li*" has two dimensions: Many individual principles and the one universal principle, which are both called the same term "*li*". Zhu Xi considered many individual *li* to be the one universal principle:

Speaking of heaven and earth and the myriad things together, [they] simply are the one *li*; when it comes to [the *li*] in man, then again each man has [his own] one *li*.<sup>13</sup>

This one *li* is important here. It is the final stage of the investigation of things, as introduced in 3.1, "After exerting himself in this way for a long time, he will one day achieve a wide and far-reaching penetration," I suppose that to reach this final stage is akin to the practical wisdom (or phronesis) focused on in this conference.

Myriad things all have this *li*; all the *li* come from the one source. Yet, because

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<sup>11</sup> YL vol.7, p.124.

<sup>12</sup> See the *Analects*,19:12.

<sup>13</sup> YL vol.1, p.2; Kim(2000), p.20.



the positions in which they reside are different, the functions of their *li* are not one."<sup>14</sup>

After continuing to explore what should be done in various things and events, we will shift to a position to penetrate everything. This is the ultimate purpose of Zhu Xi's theory of knowledge. Therefore, the mind of a sage is expressed as "complete harmony in one *li*, to reply to any situation in an appropriate manner, but the way to reply is different for different situations."<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. From habituation to the final state beyond language

His methodology of knowledge can be regarded as a kind of habitualization of knowledge. First, Zhu Xi comments that learning is imitation<sup>16</sup>. It is to imitate the words and actions of the person (sage) one idealizes.

"Learning is imitating" [as I wrote in the commentary on *Analects*] and means to imitate the person. One still cannot be like Confucius, so one should imitate him. One still cannot be like the Duke of Zhou, so one should imitate him. It is the same as [the art of] the medical doctor or shaman.<sup>17</sup>

For Zhu Xi, learning is imitating, and he tried to imitate the mind of sages such as Confucius. "Sages" refers to specific figures and personalities understood through the Classics. A sage was a concrete person with "atmosphere (*qi-xiang*)" that cannot be abstracted to any extent, and that cannot be expressed in words either. In our ordinary lives, we sometimes meet the situation in which we feel someone's behavior contains contradictions. This occurs when it is viewed and analyzed from outside. We cannot deny that the behavior which seems contradictory to others is also selected consistently by the person's consciousness. In other words, it is made from the same one mind. To imitate a certain person and to become like that person means to acquire and possess the *li* of that person. This is the basis of the expression of their saying "anyone can become sage by learning".

Second, Zhu Xi emphasized that learning is to become proficient. He expresses it through the metaphor of ripe and immature fruit. The difference

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<sup>14</sup> YL vol.18, p.398; Kim(2000), p.20.

<sup>15</sup> His commentary on *Analects* 4:15

<sup>16</sup> His commentary on *Analects* 1:1

<sup>17</sup> YL vol.20, p.448.

between sages and ordinary people is expressed as the difference between "ripe" and "immature," though "ripe" itself was thought unable to express it in the writing:

Under Heaven, there is no "I" that cannot be explained. But mature itself may not be explained in some cases.<sup>18</sup>

Reading must be ripe. When ripe, its taste will be different. For example, when eating fruit, eating unripe fruit is the same as eating ripe fruit in terms of "eating". Just the taste is different.<sup>19</sup>

Even if people can read the same book and even explain the contents in the same way, each taste will be different depending on the extent of each one's ripe/raw level. This implies that there is deepness in recognition itself, even though the behavior (reading) and judgment (commentary) are similar. Though it is easy for others to see and discriminate the difference through concrete expression such as reading or commentary, the degree of recognition and deepness can only be understood by the person himself / herself. In this way, the deepening recognition that Zhu Xi deals with has aspects that cannot be distinguished from others and at the same time transcends linguistic expression. That is why they will be described by the words "intention", "meaning" and "taste".

"Review the old [understanding] so as to find out the new"<sup>20</sup> does not mean that "the new" is sought apart from "the old" and that there is another "new". It means that "the new" naturally comes out when you are constantly exercising "the old" all the time. Sometimes clarity differs between previous understanding and current understanding, sometimes a better taste is found naturally on the basis of previous understanding, sometimes another taste arises in the previous understanding. Master Cheng Yi also says: "I read the *Analects* before I was twenty years old, and I already knew the meaning of those sentences. Even though I read the *Analects* now, the meaning of the sentences is the same, but the taste is different".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> YL vol.117, p.2817.

<sup>19</sup> YL vol.14, p.254.

<sup>20</sup> The *Analects* 2:11

<sup>21</sup> YL vol.9, p.153.

No matter how often you review the old, if you cannot find "the reason why it is as it is, even though you become well-informed using the new information in your speech, and there are virtually no uses except for good speaking and good writing, there is a limit to learning as if water in a puddle is free from a water source."<sup>22</sup>

Here appears a world of deepening tastes, which is opposed to the idea of fixed meaning. Therefore, mere accumulation of knowledge, lectures, and writings will expose the limits of knowledge like the water in a puddle free from a water source.

##### 5. "Practical wisdom" as the final stage

In an attempt to overcome the limits of individual knowledge as described above, Zhu Xi takes the phase of one universal principle (one "li"). However, he does not seem eager to explain the state of the transcendental stage of this universal principle. When one disciple repeatedly asked him how to reach the stage of this one *li*, the following conversations were recorded.

One disciple: "If one investigates all the bases of each thing, will they be gathered together into a single one?"

Zhu Xi: "You don't need to worry about whether they become one. If you do so one by one, a thousand things become thousands, ten thousand things become tens of thousands, and naturally become one. The boat floats when the water is full. For a while you leave such suffering [as in trying to make it one], and keep to the path".<sup>23</sup>

The sage never said there was one universal principle, and in many cases just said there are many individual things. Only by understanding what each individual thing ought to be, can one understand that the principles are inherently consistent. Even if one who doesn't know myriad things all have their own principles and repeatedly asks for the one universal principle, one cannot know where that lies. This is exactly the thing that the words of the sages teach and what the learner should work on all his life. You must

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<sup>22</sup> Questions and Answers on the *Analects* 2:11

<sup>23</sup> YL vol.117, p.2826.

understand "what it ought to be" for each thing. If "what it is should be" is known, that is one universal principle as it is.<sup>24</sup>

Both of these conversations referred to the ultimate goal of "the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge". In summary, they mean that many individual understandings of things are gathered together, becoming a single thing naturally and unnoticeably, everything being permeated by that one thing. This one thing is the point of "achieving a wide and far-reaching penetration" as practical wisdom that flexibly responds to various changing situations and allows one to judge and act appropriately. Previous research has shown several different views of this state.

(a) Leap of induction

Some researchers think Zhu Xi's method of cultivating practical wisdom is a kind of induction method, and that the process also seems to be similar to a "leap of induction." One will suddenly notice the one principle that goes through the whole by continuing to investigate things, as in the inductive method. Surely, Zhu Xi describes an analogy. ("Even if you do not understand all, if you understand 50 to 60 % of things, they are almost similar"<sup>25</sup>. "If we learn about seven or eight of the dozen, the remaining few items will be understood because of the similarity."<sup>26</sup>) Based on this, they argue that the process from individual knowledge to sudden penetration is to accumulate individual knowledge by the induction method and analogy and to convert it to a global perception.

(b) Jigsaw puzzle missing a piece

Other researchers criticize the above explanation (a). Taking the point that Zhu Xi often regarded the final stage of knowledge as a problem of actual feeling (taste), 'penetration' cannot be described logically, and can be caught continuously rather than by leaping. With respect to "analogy", Zhu Xi's intention is not focused on the content of the remaining individual principles that have not yet been understood and inferred concretely, rather on the whole picture being able to be predicted such as with a jigsaw puzzle missing a piece.

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<sup>24</sup> YL vol.27, p.677.

<sup>25</sup> YL vol.18, p.395.

<sup>26</sup> YL vol.18, p.406.

### (c) Overall sum

My opinion is as follows. According to the material quoted above, eventually the final stage is explained with "one", but it is told only in the sense that it sees the whole as a group (aggregate). As Zhu Xi says: "By understanding the many things on the desk one by one, it is natural to see what kind of things should be on the desk at the end"<sup>27</sup>, so we will grasp the sum total in one group called "the desk". In other words, we should think that he considers things including various contents together in the form of "one". In this way, it cannot be thought that Zhu Xi wanted to say that there is one universal principle with explicit content, and that it is required for logical induction. Although Zhu Xi often said that the principles of myriad things emerge from the one universal principle, this process is the converse especially in his method of learning. The one universal principle was considered as the comprehensive sum of all individual things, each being investigated as it should be.

## 6. Conclusion

Finally, I would like to mention that Zhu Xi was worried about arguing such a final stage. A detailed conversation with Chen Chun, a representative disciple of Zhu Xi, tells us his concern. In this conversation, Chen Chun asked repeatedly what state the final stage known as "one" or "penetration" was, based on Confucius's several words in the *Analects*: "My doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity"(4:15) and "I give my approval to Dian"(11:26).<sup>28</sup> Zhu Xi criticized his attitude and said:

I prefer that people not talk about these themes. Every part of the *Analects* from the beginning to the end is a place for people to practice. It is not that everything is achieved if you only argue with the words; "I give my approval to Dian". ... If you read the words of sages thoroughly, it should become as clear as if you see such things in front of you. You have neglected all of this, only picking on the words "I give my approval to Dian" and arguing with them. It is

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<sup>27</sup> YL vol.18, p.396

<sup>28</sup> In this conversation, Confucius asked several disciples what they want to do if some ruler were to know them. Confucius gave his approval only to Dian's among their replies. Dian's reply is as follows; "In this, the last month of spring, with the dress of the season all complete, along with five or six young men who have assumed the cap, and six or seven boys, I would wash in the Yi, enjoy the breeze among the rain altars, and return home singing." Neo-Confucians often discussed the meaning of Confucius's approval, and this joyful mental state of Dian is idealized as a kind of the final stage of learners.

just like eating only the outside of a sweet bun (man-tou) and not eating the bean jam inside it. Its taste is not tasted. It was not bad to argue with the words in the past, but nowadays this discussion has come to be too frequent, moreover, all discussions are foolish. Recently I have learned that these discussions are useless chatter and do nothing to accumulate real understanding....Even though the principles of myriad things is one universal principle, the learner must first tackle the myriad things in everyday life. They accumulate and you naturally find them to be one universal principle. You do not want to tackle myriad things, you just want to ask for one principle. You just like talking about these themes such as “I give my approval to Dian” or “Joy of Yan Hui”.<sup>29</sup> Though everything is discussed in Master Cheng's writing, these themes are seldom discussed . Why did Master Cheng not say much about them? Why do learners now talk about them so much? After all, it is just meaningless imagination.<sup>30</sup>

The approach will be blind, unless the destination can be firmly determined. But there is no other way you can take from the current point. Zhu Xi points out that the danger of asking for “one”, “one principle”, or “penetration” itself precludes making a steady effort. Here is a problem that it is considered dangerous by Zhu Xi who set the goal: To ask the contents of the goal. Researchers also may share the danger of asking for the goal and fall into " meaningless imagination". In other words, it is necessary to keep walking on an unfinished journey following an ideal person such as a sage. This attitude itself is thought to be one of the sure ways to pursue “practical wisdom”.

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<sup>29</sup> Yan Hui is the most famous and representative disciple of Confucius. The word “Joy of Yan Hui” that Master Cheng Yi referred to in his writing is also one of the expressions of the final phase of learners.

<sup>30</sup> YL vol.117, p.2819.

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